

# **Texas A&M**

## **Student Exchange Report by Owen van Eer**

During the fall semester of 2015 I studied at Texas A&M University as part of the exchange program. The university is situated in a small city called College Station, where the 60,000 students (called Aggies) make up the biggest share of the population. The campus of the university creates a community in itself. It has all facilities needed to survive, like small shops, swimming pools, sport facilities and dining services. Many of the students live on campus. They are united by all the traditions created over the years. The love of the students for their school is shown by their support for the sport teams. The Texas A&M football team is usually one of the top teams in the country. Their weekly games not only attract current students, but whole families of former Aggies take out an entire day to support the team. Therefore, the stadium that offers space to over 100,000 people is usually filled to the brim. On game days the entire campus is turned upside down.

However, taking a break from the campus life and getting out of the small city isn't easy. Everything is bigger in Texas and the distances sure are. You will be one and a half hour underway to get to the nearest big city, Houston. The other big cities in Texas are all in reach within three hours. The university offers free bus transportation on campus, but to get outside College Station a car is needed. If you get in touch with American students they will be happy to take you with them home for the weekend. Furthermore, there are very convenient car renting possibilities.

### **Preparation**

Before you can enter the university, there is a lot of paperwork that needs to be done. After getting selected for the exchange by our Erasmus University, you have to apply at Texas A&M university itself. There is a whole list of documents that need to be uploaded. There is a website designed for incoming exchange students which will guide you through the process<sup>1</sup>. Also, there is a student abroad advisor (Ben Petty) who is happy to answer all of your questions quickly. So, don't hesitate to do so. First thing to do for the application is get a Bacterial Meningitis Vaccination. The other requirements are pretty straightforward.

After submitting your application, you have to wait to be approved. The university will send you all needed forms for the rest of the process. With that you can make an appointment to obtain a student visa. This requires even more paperwork than for your exchange application.

Of course you will also need to book a flight. The university will recommend you to do this after you've received your visa, so that you're sure to be able to stay in the country. However, since chances are pretty big that you'll obtain your visa, it might be worth the money to book your flight earlier. You can either take a flight directly to College Station and then take a taxi to the university or you can take a flight to Houston International Airport and then take the shuttle for \$40 dollars to be dropped off at your desired destination in College Station.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://studyabroad.tamu.edu/Resources/Incoming-Exchange-Students>

Another thing to take care of in advance is your housing. Texas A&M University guarantees place for exchange students on campus if you apply in time. You can also look for apartments off campus. The advantage of apartments off campus is that you usually get more for what you pay. The services and quality are higher. On-campus you will have to share your room with someone else in most cases. I still chose to live on-campus however and I'm glad I did. Not only are you closer to all university facilities, but you will also get more involved into the campus life. There are some really active dorms. The elder students organize a lot of events for the freshmen and you will make friends easily.

### **Arrival**

In the airplane you will be handed out one more form. You will have to hand this one in once you've landed. Make sure you have your exact address details, since you will have to fill that in on to your form. Getting through the security checks may take some time. Make sure to take this into account if you have to catch a scheduled shuttle for example.

Upon arrival on the campus there are some check-ins that need to take place. In case you live on-campus you will meet up with your Residence Advisor from which you will get access to your room. You will also have to get checked in at the university to make sure you arrived. At the same time you will get a talk about the university. There is also a required general meeting for all the exchange students together. This is the only central meeting moment for exchange students. So, if you're planning to meet up with many internationals, this is your chance. However, there are also lots of international Facebook groups that organize trips and events.

This general meeting is the kick-off for an entire introduction week. This week is comparable to the Eureka week in Rotterdam, designed for freshmen. There are lots of activities organized by the university accompanied by free food and goodies. During the night the upperclassmen of the dorms take over and organize free house parties for their freshmen. These parties are a great way to get to know a bunch of people. The upperclassmen are also very helpful during the day. They will provide tours on the campus and they can take you with their cars to buy groceries. In the beginning this is very convenient, since you will need to buy some basic stuff as bed linens, plates and pans. A trip to the Walmart is therefore highly recommended.

It depends on your dorm how active the upperclassmen are in organizing events. The traditional and cheaper dorms are more active and the north side of campus seems to be more vivid than the southern part. I lived in a dorm called Walton and it turned out to be a great fit. It is the cheapest and the most active dorm.

Also after the introduction week the university organizes several events. An important one is the MSC Open House. Here most organizations were represented. There is a diverse range of clubs. Besides the fraternities and sororities, there are organizations for all kinds of activities or beliefs. I joined a Salsa Fusion club and an International organization, which linked mentors to mentees. The mentors can show the mentees around and the organization also has some central events to learn from each other's cultures.

## Courses

At the Erasmus University I study Econometrics. I saw my minor as a perfect opportunity to specialise more into general economics. That is why I only took economic related courses at Texas A&M. The courses were very interesting to me, but the level of the used techniques wasn't very high. Also there's quite some overlap with already attended courses at the Erasmus University. With some effort it is therefore not hard to get satisfying grades. Also, I'd recommend if you have interests in a different major as well, to take out some of those courses there.

On the whole, the teachers were of a pretty decent level. The more specialised, upperclassmen classes are in smaller groups of about 30 students. This gives room for more student input during the lectures. The American school system allows for more choice in courses for your curriculum. So, you will get in touch with a lot of people from other majors during your classes. Also, your final grade depends less on one major test. About 70% of my grades for all my classes was already determined before finals week. I took the following courses:

- *Money & Banking 311 (3 ECTS)*

The first half of the lectures are closely related to Macro-Economics and Finance taught at the ESE. However, the second part handles different models and takes a deeper look into the American system. It is one of the more essential courses. Therefore a lot of people take out this course, also people with non-economics related majors.

- *Sports economics 315 (3 ECTS)*

This course has a lot of resemblance with Micro-Economics. It applies the techniques learnt in Micro-Economics on sports examples. Through the course you get to know a lot more about the American major sports. The teacher is very enthusiastic and uses a lot of examples to illustrate the theory. Sometimes a bit too many examples.

- *Economics of gender and race 318 (3 ECTS)*

This teacher is very strict, but righteous. The course provides a lot of interesting articles to illustrate the developments in gender and race equalities. The material is very current and relevant.

- *Development economics 330 (3 ECTS)*

This course is very engaging. However, the material is handled in a pretty slow pace. The teacher likes to give the word to the students and provoke discussions between the classmates about different policies.

- *Health economics 414 (3 ECTS)*

This is probably the most intensive course I took. However, it was also my favourite one. The costs of healthcare are very relevant nowadays, especially in the United States where healthcare expenses make up about 20% of the GDP. Besides the study book, we also had to read selected chapters out of a research written book and several papers.

## **Finances**

<i>SEVIS Fee</i>	\$180
<i>Application Fee VISA</i>	\$100
<i>Health Insurance</i>	\$850
<i>Flight</i>	\$800
<i>Housing</i>	\$1,700
<i>Meal Plan</i>	\$1,300
<i>Groceries + Food outside</i>	\$500
<i>Trips</i>	**
<i>Going out</i>	**
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>\$5430+</b>

\*All costs are expressed in dollars since this gives a more accurate insight into the costs. The exchange rate had dropped immensely just before I went to the United States. During our stay the exchange rate was about \$1,1 : €1. So, especially if you take into account the cost associated with transferring the money from euros to dollars, the amount was about the same expressed in euros. However, this might be different with a possible different exchange rate in the upcoming years.

The first two costs are administrative ones. The health insurance is expensive, but required. The costs for the flight are strongly dependent on how early in advance you book your flight.

I lived in Walton, the cheapest on-campus dorm. If you wish to have a more luxurious dorm or apartment on campus, the costs for a semester can increase to about \$3500. However, I thought the facilities in Walton were pretty decent. The oldest dorm on-campus just got renovated the summer before my fall semester. So the value for money was satisfying.

You can take out a meal plan at the university. This gives the right to a certain amount of meals and dinning dollars to buy food. My meal plan allowed me to buy one big meal a day on average (there are all you can eat dining facilities). This was sufficient assuming that you might be gone for some weekends, you make your own breakfast and you eat outside once in a while. The meal plan is relatively expensive. It assumes that you buy a meal for \$10 each time. If you cook yourself or buy your meals with your direct dollars you will probably spend less. On the other side, a meal plan is very convenient in buying meals. You only need to swipe with your student ID card. Besides, eating at the on-campus dining facilities is a good way to meet up with people.

There were still some more costs for food. I usually made my own breakfast and lunch and ate off-campus at times. Within the cost item *groceries + food* I also counted the expenses to all my basic needs for my room, like pots, plates, cutlery, bed linen, soap, etc.

The last two expenses (noted with \*\*) of course fully depend on your own preferences. I have spent quite some nights in the Northgate district or Bryant to explore the nightlife. Costs are not really different from what you can expect in the Netherlands, apart from the fact that you have to pay an entrance fee between 5 and 10 dollars if you're under 21, since this is the legal drinking age in the United States. I have also travelled a lot or made small trips to different

events. Of course, then you have to take even more possible costs into account, like transportation, accommodation and other expenses.

There are virtually no transportation costs needed on campus. Free buses are available for students, which drive around regularly. Quite some people have a bicycle though, to get around even easier. You could buy or rent one.

Some internationals purchase a phone plan. However, it can be quite expensive and my experience is that you don't need to call or text that much. The free Wi-Fi on campus and other public spaces help out pretty well.

### **Concluding remarks**

An exchange at Texas A&M is the perfect opportunity to get a better impression of American college life. The Aggies form a tight community. Organizations and dorms organize enough weekly activities. It might be a good idea to join some since you will have plenty of time in between your classes while other American freshmen are in fact busy getting through their first months. The students live for the weekends when they can support their sport teams. You should definitely blend in into these events. Football game tickets are quite expensive. If you are sure you will attend as many games as possible, then you should order a sports pass well before you come to the university. This gives you free access to all the home events of every sports team.

Besides the campus life, just enjoy the Texan life in general. Temperatures are relatively high all throughout your stay and extremely high in the first months or two. So don't forget to bring your shorts and t-shirts. Also characteristic to Texas is the country lifestyle. So, visit some of the country bars and try to get on a shooting range. Texas has some huge cities. Like most American cities, these can be quiet spread out. So you'll have to know where you need to be in order to appreciate them to the fullest. It might be worthwhile to not only focus on the cities, but also visit some of the parks Texas offers. Wherever you might end up, the environment will probably be open and friendly. Appreciate that and you'll have a good time.